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ABSTRACT

In 1977 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) organized the Community Schools Advisory Panel (CSAP) because administrators of smaller school districts wanted regular opportunities to express their schools' views to TEA decision makers, especially the Commissioner of Education. CSAP consists of 14 representatives of Texas' 1,009 community schools (districts with only 1 high school) and 1 education service center director, who work with a TEA staff liaison person. As much as possible, CSAP membership reflects schools of all sizes from all parts of the state. Members serve for five years, with a rotation of three members every August. Members maintain contact with the school administrators they represent at regional inservice meetings during the year, through professional associations, and through informal networks. Regular spring and fall panel meetings are preceded by planning meetings, chaired by the Commissioner of Education, and include TEA presentations. Deliberation of issues is frank but friendly in an atmosphere of mutual respect. CSAP now has the opportunity to influence the climate in which community schools operate. TEA now takes advantage of available expertise and wins good will. CSAP has worked to the mutual benefit of TEA and the community schools of Texas. (SB)

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THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ADIVSORY PANEL

A TEXAS APPROACH

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THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ADVISORY PANEL

A TEXAS APPROACH

The Community Schools Advisory Panel (CSAP) was organized by the Texas Education Agency in 1977 in response to requests by school administrators from smaller sized districts. These administrators expressed the desire for an opportunity to represent the viewpoint of these schools to the Commissioner of Education and other Agency decision makers.

Historically, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has made continuing efforts to determine the concerns of school administrators. Two unofficial advisory groups had been meeting for some time with the Commissioner to apprise him of problems and concerns of urban and suburban school districts. However, the large number of community schools (those 1009 school districts having no more than one high school in the district) had traditionally conveyed concerns and problems in other, less organized, ways.

In 1977 community school administrators believed, and TEA agreed, that advice and input on matters affecting these schools would be more thoughtful and substantive if representatives of the group could meet personally with the Commissioner of Education and his staff at regular intervals. The Agency viewed this as an opportunity to gain the understanding and enlist the support of administrators. In addition, administrators could react to proposed regulations before they became effective, and could estimate the impact of various decisions on districts having diverse characteristics.

A TEA staff member , long associated with all aspects of community schools, was assigned the task of being the liaison between TEA and the newly formed Panel. A second TEA staff person continues the assignment of working with

all community schools in other projects.

The Panel is composed of 14 representatives of community schools and one education service center director. Panel membership is for a period of 5 years. Three members rotate off the Panel in August and three new members, selected by Panel, join the group. Characteristics of new members include a thorough understanding of all aspects of school administration and an awareness of the problems confronting community schools. Members also need the resources, time and travel dollars, necessary for effective Panel membership. The Panel as a whole reflects all sizes of schools classfied as community schools. School districts represented on the Panel in 1980-81 ranged in size from 125 to 4,875 ADA. In so far as possible all areas of the state are also represented. In 1981-82 ten of the twenty education service center regions will be represented on the Panel.

Theoretically, Panel members represent the views of their peers, i.e., educators from community schools, and as far as has been possible from a practical point of view, the theoretical model has been implemented. It seems that differences in problems encountered in community schools, and thus the viewpoints to be represented, are due predominately to differences in size. In spite of that, the location of a school district is a factor that sometimes presents special problems since location relates to both distance and time. For example, the distance of the district from the delivery system (education service center or state department of education) demands special accomodation by all concerned. ESC and TEA staff must schedule more time and dollars for travel. Schools must wait for services and/or supplies. Consequently, the Panel membership strives to reflect differences in size and location.

The Panel's credibility, however, is established through actual contact with the persons represented. Most efforts to establish and maintain contact by Panel members, as well as the two community schools staff members at TEA, center on the regional cooperative inservice meetings scheduled around the state throughout the year. Panel members also rely on professional associations and informal networks with other administrators. Educators are urged to communicate their problems and concerns to the Panel or the TEA liaison. For those administrators/schools not reached by these efforts, dissemination of information concerning Panel meetings and activities are circulated in education service center and Texas Association of Community Schools newsletters.

Led by the TEA liaison, planning meetings are conducted in preparation for the regular fall and spring meetings. Panel members come to the planning meetings prepared to discuss concerns or to pose questions about developing or ongoing issues. These concerns and questions may have come from other administrators or from the Panelist's own experiences. After an unstructured discussion of all issues of possible interest, proposed agenda items are prioritized. The list usually contains more items than can be included on the agenda since the Commissioner or Agency staff may also want to include specific items. If possible, the TEA liaison makes an attempt to resolve or clarify questions which were left off the agenda. If the problem persists it may be on the agenda at a later date.

The meeting is set for a date when the Commissioner and key TEA staff can attend. The agenda is prepared and background information concerning items to be discussed is distributed as necessary to either Panel or TEA staff. Details of the meeting and the agenda are distributed statewide.

Panel meetings are chaired by the Commissioner of Education. Presentations are made by TEA staff members responsible for the program under discussion. Deliberations are quite open and frank, participants often intent. The mood, though attentive, is relaxed and often relieved by levity. A feeling of mutual respect prevails. Guests are often in attendance. The TEA liaison performs follow-up activities as necessary and as soon as possible.

The Community Schools Advisory Panel process has worked to the mutual benefit of TEA and the community schools of Texas. Several events may be cited that are indicative of the Panel's influence.

Besides the regular meetings, a special meeting was called in July, 1980 at the request of the Chairman of the State Board of Education for the purpose of presenting the State Board's legislative package to Panelists. On another occasion, the Panel was asked to respond to an issue raised in the report of the Governor's Committee on Education. The issue involved cooperative services of a vocational and academic nature that could be provided by the 20 Regional Education Service Centers. A Panel member had previously been invited to testify to the Governor's Committee concerning all aspects of schools and schooling in community schools. The Panel also presented a position paper to TEA concerning implementation of a law concerning new standards for instructional resources centers. In 1979, as a result of the Panel's nomination, a member was appointed to the then new Commission on Standards for the Teaching Profession. Consequently, the concerns of community schools are represented on this important commission. Panel members also participated in two multi-state meetings attempting to identify unmet needs and explore possible solutions for rural and small schools. They were the Regional Rural Roundtable, sponsored by the United States Office of Education, and R&D Speaks: Rural and Small Schools, sponsored by the Regional Exchange at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Two members serve on a Federal/State

Relations Commission and two others on a Bilingual Education Task Force. Other Panel members also serve on committees.

Besides the obvious benefits, the above mentioned events have served several other purposes. Both the Panel and the state education agency have profited from this process. By assuring that representatives of various sizes of schools and populations are members of improtant committees, by inviting advice and input from practitioners, TEA takes advantage of a broad range of knowledge and experience and is seen as responsive to needs. By being frank and accessible, TEA has won the enthusiastic good will of the Panel and community schools all over the state. For the Panel, by listening to fellow administrators, by articulating problems and concerns to TEA staff, it has an opportunity to influence the rules and climate under which schools will operate. By continuing to react to immediate concerns and initiating study of future issues which have the potential for strongly impacting community schools, the Panel will continue to merit the praise for leadership and professionalism that has come from fellow administrators and the state educational leadership alike. By continuing to work together TEA and the schools represented by the Panel can accelerate progress toward the goal of providing excellence in education for all of Texas' children.